

## **Pointer helps children find stable homes via the law**

**By Carrie Cunningham**

Grosse Pointe News

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Nov. 6, 2003 – Debra Gutierrez-

McGuire has spent her life protecting the most vulnerable in society – the lives of children.

Last July, she was appointed special assistant to Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Maura D. Corrigan on foster care and adoption issues. The post is the culmination of many years helping children achieve stable home lives after suffering from abuse and neglect.

Fresh out of Wayne State University law school in 1985, Gutierrez-McGuire worked for the Detroit-based Legal Aid and Defender Association (LADA), where she represented children subjected to abuse and unsavory living conditions.

"The cases were very heart wrenching," said Gutierrez-McGuire. "They ranged from dirty houses and lack of appliances to really serious abuse."

Sometimes she would work on getting parents rehabilitated, but when the abuse was severe, she would work on terminating parents' rights and finding the children foster or adoptive homes.

"If the parents can be worked with and re-educated, then returning a child home is a good thing. Usually children do want to go back with their parents, but in some instances you can't," she said.

Children who underwent abuse often suffered psychologically, said Gutierrez-McGuire. They would act out, sometimes hurting other children, sometimes abusing their dolls.

"It is sad, and you can see that that's what they're used to," she said.

After LADA, Gutierrez-McGuire served as an assistant attorney general, representing the Family Independence Agency, Wayne County's group of social workers.

In 1988, she joined the State Appellate Defender's Office, where she represented children tried as adults in criminal cases. She worked on many murder and armed robbery cases.

She joined the Michigan Supreme Court as a commissioner in August 2002 before she was plucked by Chief Justice Corrigan to be a special assistant.

In her new role, she has been talking to all of the people and agencies involved in the adoption and foster care system, like the Family Independent Agency, probate court judges, foster care workers and family court administrators.

"We need to get some permanency for these children. When they have an adoptive family that's willing to take care of them, that's a positive," she said. "They know their future. They have some stability."



One glaring problem she and those working in the system have unearthed is attorneys who failed to meet with children they were representing.

"I just don't see why you would never meet with a client in any role as a lawyer," she said. "What we were finding is that children really had no voice."

To rectify this problem, the Supreme Court issued new forms that stipulate a lawyer must visit a child before he or she can get paid.

"I was very pleased," Gutierrez-McGuire said of the institution of the forms.

One area that Corrigan wanted to work on was cases that linger in the system for years, keeping children from landing in a stable home.

"Children are languishing in procedural limbo because the courts aren't moving fast enough to either get them back to their homes or into adoptive homes," said Gutierrez-McGuire.

As a response to this issue, the period a parent has to appeal has been shortened to 14 days, and delayed appeals have been eliminated altogether. The length of time for a Supreme Court review has also been cut.

Gutierrez-McGuire says these changes have made the adoption and foster care process more efficient and streamlined.

One upcoming event that will be beneficial for children is Michigan Adoption Day on Nov. 25. Adoptions will be finalized in thirty counties across the state. Gutierrez-McGuire said Michigan's Adoption Day is by far the largest in the country; most other states' adoption days occur in one or two cities.

When she took a juvenile justice class at Michigan State University as an undergraduate, Gutierrez-McGuire became fascinated with legal issues. She always liked lawyer shows on television and was riveted by the prospect of being a litigator. With employment at LADA and immersion in children's issues, she decided to make it her life's work.

Gutierrez-McGuire's mother grew up in Grand Rapids and her father was raised in Holland. She was born in Madison, Wisconsin but lived around the country and the world while growing up because her dad was in the Air Force. She graduated from high school in Spain.

A mother of two sons, Michael and Sean, Gutierrez-McGuire is married to husband Daniel, who currently works at LADA. She has lived in Grosse Pointe Park for 14 years.

"I really like the community spirit. It has this small town feel," she said of Grosse Pointe. "I love my neighbors. We look out for each other."

When she is not working for children, Gutierrez-McGuire watches her son play football or attends soccer games that her husband coaches.

Gutierrez-McGuire says she loves working for Corrigan who, she says, has an avid interest in children's issues, and she has enjoyed the communication between different parts of the adoption and foster care system.

"It's been a real learning experience," she said.

Photo by Carrie Cunningham

Debra Gutierrez-McGuire, above, was named Special Assistant to Michigan Supreme Court Justice Maura D. Corrigan for adoption and foster care issues last July.